

The Early Years of San Diego Country Club

By Dean Knuth

It was a couple who had never heard of the game of golf who planted the seed that became the San Diego Country Club. Charles Douglas and his wife (recorded in the club's history only as Mrs. Douglas) were out hunting for mushrooms one fall day in 1896 when they found a hard-spherical object that they could not identify. On their way back, the couple stopped by the home of Dr. and Mrs. William Edwards, who had moved to San Diego from the East, to show them the strange little object "that might have been some petrified shrub fruit."

The Edwards' "were highly amused" by the find. It was a golf ball, one of several they had lost while trying to play golf in the heavy brush on a University Heights mesa. The Easterners introduced the Douglas' to golf and enrolled them in what became, in 1897, the San Diego Country Club.

A dozen or so charter club members and some hired men cleaned off the brush and tumbleweeds on the Balboa Park land loaned to them by the City of San Diego, and created a primitive 9-hole course with unimproved fairways and tamped-sand greens. The 495-yard second hole stretched from what is now the San Diego Zoo parking lot to the green situated on the site of the Old Globe Theatre.

A clubhouse, about the size of a two-car garage, served as the 19th hole at Upas and Park Blvd.



This is on the northside of the zoo. Lester G. Bradley recorded an oral history for the San Diego Historical Society and said: "The men all worked together and took shovels, hoes and rakes and got it all cleaned up and they made the greens with some sand on top of them—and they started in playing golf." He added, "The course had nine holes and the caddies got 15 cents for a round. The last hole was in that little canyon at Upas Street."

From the 1900 edition of *American Golfer*:

“Organized February 15, 1897. Incorporated February 28, 1898. Entrance fee: Men, \$15 ; women, \$1.0. Annual dues, \$12. Membership, 100. Visitors pay \$3 per month.

The nine-hole course was laid out in 1897, the names, distances and bogey figures being as follows :

Hole 1, Hard Luck, 270, Bogey 4;

Hole 2, Westward Ho, 315, Bogey 5;

Hole 3, The Cinch, Short hole, Bogey 3;

Hole 4, Deception, 260, Bogey 4;

Hole 5, Camino, 327, Bogey 5;

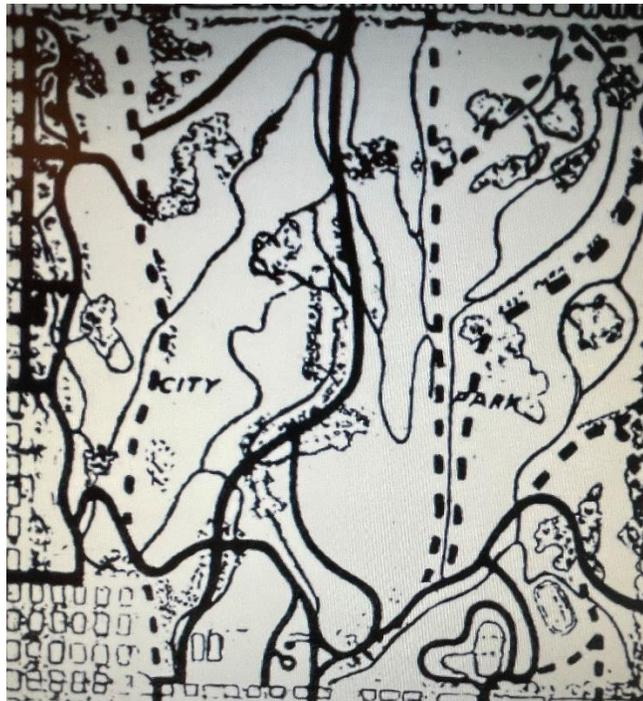
Hole 6, Buena Vista, 341, Bogey 5;

Hole 7, The Crater, 289, Bogey 4;

Hole 8, The Trap, 187, Bogey 3;

Hole 9, Canon del Diablo, 310, Bogey 5 ;

a total of 2,467 yards. The course is undulating and covered with a moss peculiar to California, and is open all the year, the value of the club property being \$1,500. Amateur record: Men, 42, by Tom West; women, 56, Miss Ada N. Smith. President, Captain W. R. Maize; vice-president, Charles P. Douglass; secretary and treasurer, Robert C. Vroom, Address 108 Laurel street, San Diego. Board of directors: Heber Ingle, Sr., Thomas K. Baker, Charles P. Douglass, Dr. Walker B. Woodward, John S. Akerman and Charles A. Emery.



In 1909 a series of roads were being made through Balboa Park which was then called City Park. This 1909 sketch by the road designer shows existing greens and hazards.

The Balboa course started with the first hole on the west side of the Zoo parking lot from Upas Street (270 yards and called “Hard Luck”. The second hole (315 yards called Westward Ho) ended at the

current Old Globe Theatre location. The third hole went from there to the Museum of Art location. Don Tartre, a long-time SDCC member saw a document showing the routing about 30 years ago and since lost to damage by the club. His recollection is that the ninth hole was played in a canyon that existed in 1897 on the east side of the Zoo parking lot and finished back at the Upas St. clubhouse. Hence the name for the hold being Canon del Diablo.

From Thomas Arnold's 1900 book on golf in the far west, he stated that at this time there were only sixteen golf courses in California with San Diego the most southerly. In southern California they all had sand/dirt greens. He described the greens this way:

“In California turf greens are a luxury that very few clubs can afford to indulge in. It does not rain enough to keep even an imitation of life in the grass, and it would cost a small fortune to irrigate the green properly. And so it is that we find all of the putting greens there made of hard-packed earth sprinkled over with a fine layer of white sand. The course of the Oakland Golf Club and that at Del Monte are the only exceptions to this rule. About the most lucid description of the earth greens that can be given is that they look like huge grindstones sunk into the earth. Golf playing on sand-greens is a vastly different matter from playing on turf. Sand-greens are decidedly easier for putting, because the surface, being perfectly smooth, offers little resistance, and the ball rolls with a precision equal to what it would be on a billiard table. Accurate approaches are next to impossible -for if the ball lands short of the green where there are sand-greens, it lies dead, and if it strikes on the green it shoots across and off the other side. This makes the game partake of a very undesirable element of luck”.

Perhaps because there were as many women members as men, social activities were popular. There was a fireworks display on the Fourth of July in 1898 that cost the club \$35.25 in incendiaries--an amount the secretary-treasurer Robert Vroom questioned, the board of directors' minutes show.

A mandolin and an upright piano--the latter later traded in for a player piano--were among the early club acquisitions. Tea was served promptly at 4 p.m. on Wednesdays and Saturdays, a service later extended to every afternoon except Sundays. By the turn of the century, club membership was limited to 200, but later expanded to 300.

Dances, picnics and table tennis tourneys were recorded in the minutes in 1900 and 1901, along with the acquisition of the nearby Silver Gate Gun Club for SDCC members' enjoyment (and to deal with the danger of errant bullets dropping on the golf course.)

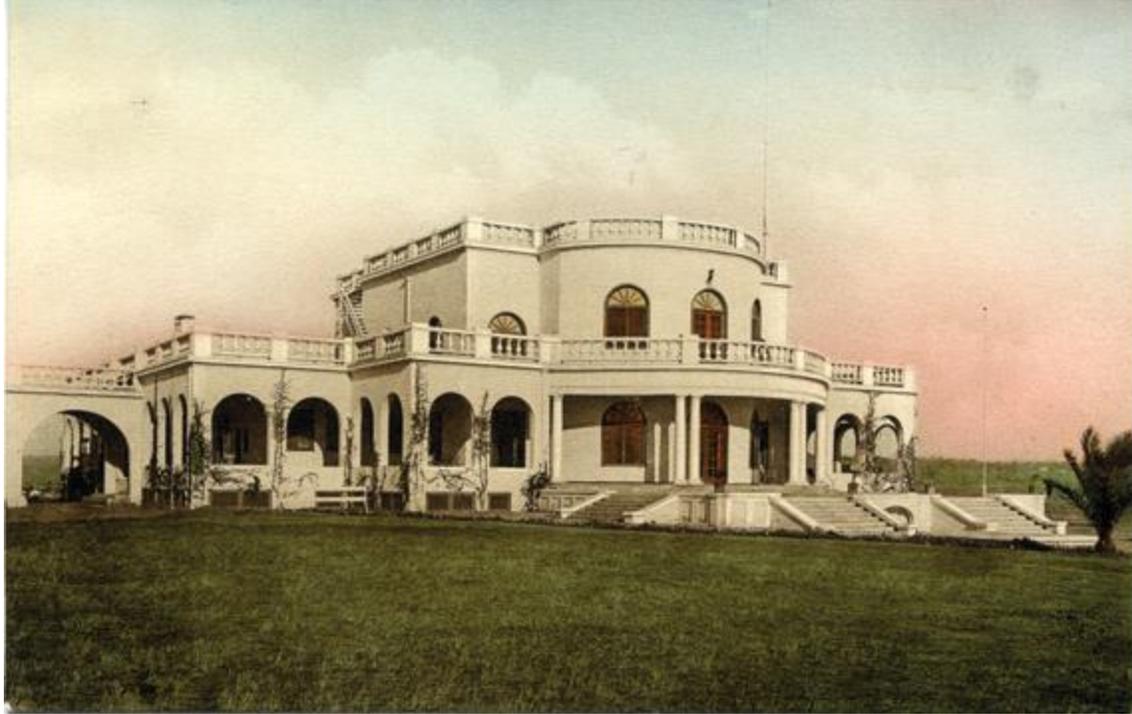


By September, the \$10,000, two-story clubhouse was completed--complete with ballroom, cocktail lounge, and grill.

Meanwhile, starting in 1909, a group of San Diego businessmen and officials planted the seed of hosting the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego instead of San Francisco. The committee was led by John D. Spreckels with U.S. Grant Jr. the first VP and Albert (Al) Spalding as 2nd VP. The decision almost was made for San Francisco in 1912 which was supported by President Taft. However, Woodrow Wilson became president and William Kettner won the congressional seat for San Diego. Almost immediately, they turned the site over to San Diego. It was Kettner who also got the Naval Training Center on the west coast moved from San Francisco's Goat Island to Point Loma.

City officials notified the San Diego Country Club that it would need all of Balboa Park, including the golf course, for the Pan American Exposition in 1915. The final eviction notice was served in June 1913.

A.G. Spalding offered to merge SDCC with his Point Loma Golf Club, which was designed and built earlier in that year for him by Tom Bendelow of Chicago. The Location in Loma Portal is now covered by Midway Drive to the north, at a point where Lytton Street becomes Chatsworth Blvd to the west, part of MCRD to the east and part of Liberty Station near the Loma Golf Course to the south. The terms of the merger were that the golf course would be leased to SDCC for a minimal charge, that Spalding would build houses along the golf course in his Loma Portal development and course-side homes would come with a membership in the club and that the club would be called Point Loma Golf Club to promote his project. SDCC members had to maintain the golf course. Finally, Spalding offered to build a beautiful clubhouse at his cost. The terms were accepted by the club.



Spalding's Point Loma Golf Club clubhouse



Site where the Point Loma clubhouse once stood

Tom Bendelow, the course architect, had emigrated from Aberdeen Scotland and gained fame while selling golf equipment for A.G. Spalding. In order to drive sales for golf equipment, he laid-out hundreds of courses, many in one day each with stakes for tees, fairways and greens. He quickly graduated to becoming Spalding's Director of Golf Course Development at its Chicago headquarters. He is especially remembered for carefully designing the first versions of

Medinah's #1, 2 and 3 courses and for the Eastlake Golf Course in Atlanta that was the first Atlanta Athletic Club. His total golf course count exceeded 700 in his 35-year American career.



Tom Bendelow (1868-1936)

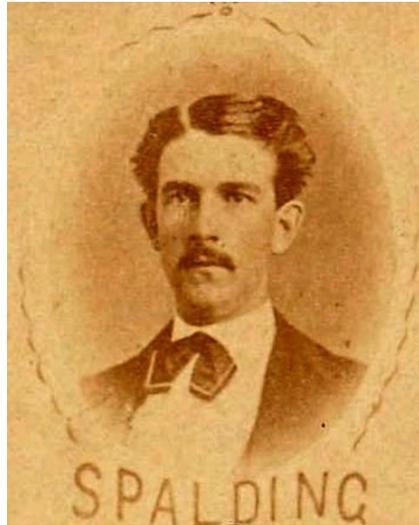
(Note: William Watson and Bendelow had worked together in building Olympia Fields Country Club. Bendelow built the first course in 1916 and Watson designed the second course in 1918. Bendelow and Watson collaborated on the third course that opened in 1920. Then came the big finish – a course along the northern edge of the property designed by famed Scottish golf architect Willie Park Jr. opened in 1922. It is Park's North Course that has continued to host big championships). Unfortunately, financial troubles in World War II forced the club to sell-off half the 700 acres and become a two-course club. Only a couple of holes from Watson have survived.

Spalding was a successful man who had three careers – as a baseball pitcher, a club owner, and a sporting-goods tycoon – and was highly successful at all of them. A fourth career, in politics, was just getting under way as a candidate for U.S. Senate when he died. And despite an initial setback, ultimately, he might well have been successful there, too.

Spalding was born in 1850, near Rockford, Illinois. As a young man he had talent as a pitcher and turned professional by 1865 and rose to the big league in five years. Once that he arrived, Spalding dominated National Association pitching, leading the league in wins for every year of its five-year existence. Remarkably, Spalding appeared in every one of the Boston Red Stockings' games in 1874 with a 52-16 win record. The team played in a total of 71

championship games (excluding exhibitions), and Spalding started 69 of them (65 were complete games). His ERA for the season was 1.92; his career ERA was 2.13. In 1874 he worked an astounding 617 innings, far more than would ever be assigned to any pitcher in a 162-game season.

Spalding had a record of 204-53 in five years in Boston, topped by a 54-5 record in 1875, when he had 23 consecutive wins. Not only did he lead in wins for every year of the National Association's existence, but he also increased the number of wins each year over the year before. Overall, he



had 91 percent of Boston's victories in the Association. He was an excellent hitter, too, with a career batting average of .313. In 411 games, he batted in 338 runs.

Spalding, as well as other stars went to the Chicago White Stockings (Team name eventually became the Cubs). Spalding was 47-12, and Chicago won the pennant. In 1877 Spalding abandoned the mound for first base. He was through as a ballplayer at age 27 because he believed that he was losing his reflexes.

Spalding became secretary of the White Stockings, becoming president in 1882. He built a team that dominated the early 1880s, as the White Stockings won pennants in 1880, 1881, 1882, 1885, and 1886.

Meanwhile, Spalding had undergone a career change from player to team owner and sporting-goods magnate. In February 1876 he opened a sporting-goods store, in partnership with his brother Walter in Chicago. Within a few years they had a four-story building in Chicago, a five-story store in New York, and outlets across the country from Oregon to Rhode Island. Spalding was able to use his influence to supply balls, bats, uniforms, and other equipment to the league. He published semiofficial guides and instruction manuals, carrying this practice over to other sports to promote his merchandise. He bought the right to make all baseballs for the major leagues and sold millions of balls and bats at his stores. He sold gloves, tennis rackets,

basketballs, golf clubs—anything related to sport, including a lucrative annual called A. G. Spalding *Spalding's Official Baseball Guide*.

He ran for the National league presidency and won. He resigned the NL presidency in April 1902.

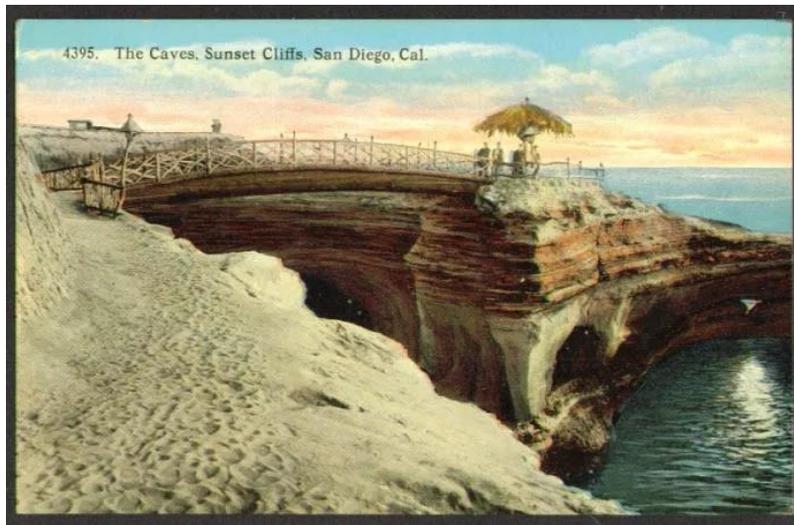


Spalding was married twice, first to Josie Keith of Boston in 1875; and they had a son. Josie died in 1899 while vacationing on the New Jersey shore with friends. Spalding married the widow Elizabeth Mayer Churchill eleven months later. She was a childhood friend and sweetheart from Illinois and his mistress of several years. He had a son with her and adopted him and her other son. Elizabeth was a disciple of Katherine Tingley who ran the Point Loma community of the Theosophical Society called Lomaland, an institution that promoted the study of religious philosophy along with a regimen of self-improvement that included the performing arts. It also believed in mysticism and they created a school for Cuban orphans. She was living in Lomaland until she remarried. (The Lomaland Theosophical community was so interesting that the Del Coronado Hotel offered tours). Spalding moved to Point Loma to be a part of that community but did not participate other than financially. He built their home in the community.



Lomaland

He supported many community projects as well. He spent millions to build-up Sunset cliffs as a public attraction and it was named Spalding Park for some years. He also was part of the big three businessmen, Spreckels, Scripps and Spalding who purchased the original Spanish Mission to preserve it. The name Padres eventually was used for San Diego's first baseball team.



Spalding Park at Sunset Cliffs



The Spalding Home today

Spalding had been in the second echelon of Chicago society, but in San Diego he became a civic leader. He built a large home at the top of Point Loma which today is the home and office of the President of Nazarene University. Spalding had a stroke and died in September 1915 just having reached his 66th birthday. His in-laws tried unsuccessfully to carry-on the Loma Portal building company but were stopped from developing further by the U.S. Government's land requirements.

Point Loma Golf Club proceeded well for less than two years after Spalding's death. In April 1917, the United States entered World War I and almost immediately, the Naval Training Center and Marine Corps Recruit Depot took away nine holes from the club. Suddenly, the club was down to nine-holes.

Members searched for a permanent site far from military installations. Searches in North County failed because there was no well water available. Then, in 1920, they found that ideal spot-- gently rolling farmland and lemon groves and celery in the outskirts of early Chula Vista and about a mile east of San Diego Bay. The important find on this property was that there were shallow irrigation wells which would allow the club to be the first in Southern California with an all grass 18-hole golf course. The location could be reached from San Diego by street cars or by automobiles along National City Blvd. (In those days there were no Interstate highways, no houses in the area, no L Street or a street into the club. They built a dirt entrance which is now is Country Club Drive). The construction site was beautiful. There was an open view to the bay to the west and Mt. Miguel to the east and it had wonderful rolling terrain. Finally, it was a short drive on Broadway to the Tijuana border while Prohibition was in effect (January 1920 to December 1933). William Watson was hired to design the course and the club could bring back its original name, San Diego Country Club.



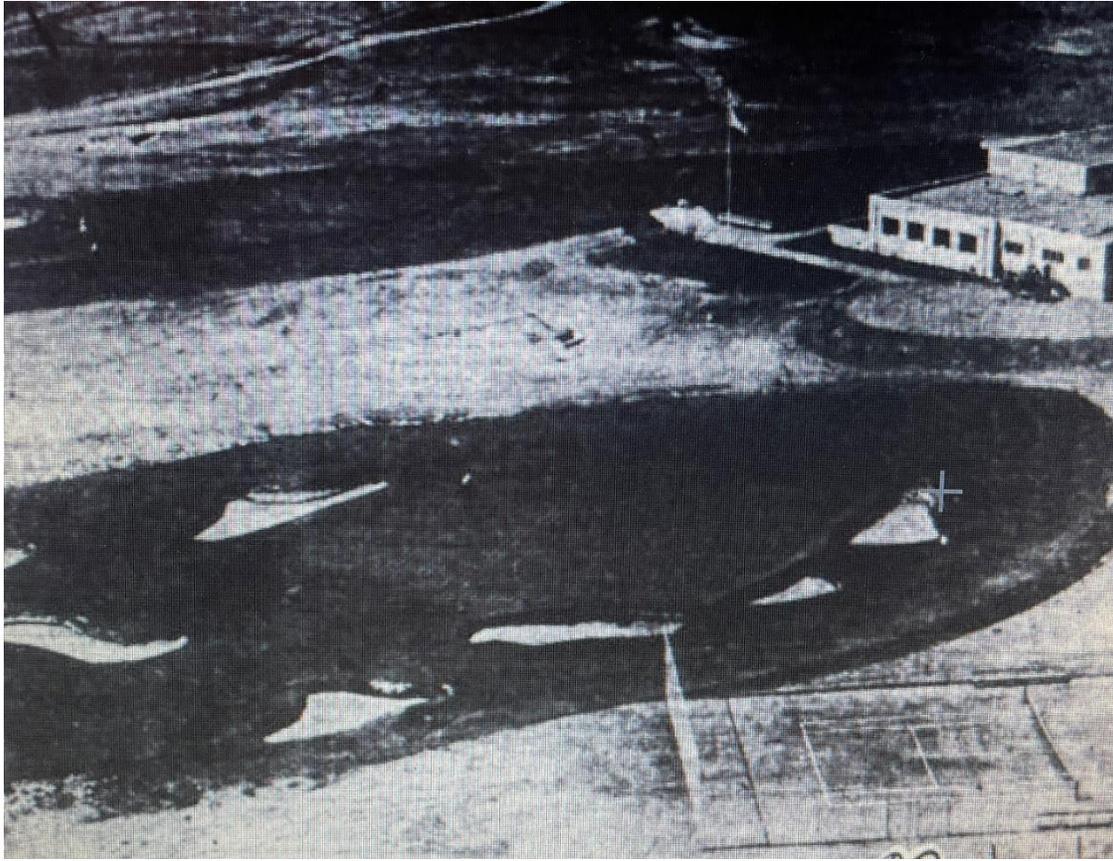
Oscar Cotton, a SDCC member and real estate man, recorded in his memoirs the momentous opening day of the new golf course on Sept. 3, 1921:

“The opening of this San Diego Country Club marked the beginning of many good old days. Golf in the daytime and parties at night. The club had a good chef; and we always had good dance music--the new tunes of the day made just about everybody want to dance--which we did, week after week, for many years.”

American Annual Golf Guide, 1921

CHULA VISTA: SAN DIEGO COUNTRY CLUB. Est. 1921. Holes 18. Length—6,415 yds. Grass greens. Pres, E.O. Hodge; Vice Pres's, L. A. Ellis and Mrs. E.F. Chase. Secy. M. Luther Ward; treas.. F.B. Gould. Professional James Simpson. Ten miles from San Diego by National Blvd. or streetcar. No limit to visitors. Sunday playing is permitted. Caddies available.

(Note that the two VP's were a man and a woman).



San Francisco Call, Volume 110, Number 39, 22 August 1921

GOLF CLUB TO BE OPENED IN SOUTH San Diego Course Ready for Play on September 3

SAN DIEGO, Aug. 22.—Another golf course -will be added to the long list of southern California links when the San Diego Country Club opens its new course with a tournament September 3, 4 and 5. The course is within convenient distance of San Diego and affords a view of ocean and mountains. Experts declare it to be strictly Scottish. Approximately \$250,000 has been invested by the club in the course, there being 160 acres of land. and a \$50,000 clubhouse on the property. Three tennis courts are being built at the clubhouse. The course was designed by William Watson of Los Angeles and will be in charge of “Jimmy” Simpson, one of the best-known professionals on the Pacific coast. The yardage for the course is as follows : First hole, 360; second, 410; third. 164; fourth. 505; fifth, 388; sixth, 186; seventh. 318; eighth, 465; ninth. 385 ; tenth. 480; eleventh. 320; twelfth, 198; thirteenth. 449 ; fourteenth, 382 : fifteenth, 525 ; sixteenth. 139 ; seventeenth. 321 ; eighteenth. 425. The eighteenth hole is declared to be one of the most remarkable on the coast, being well trapped and with the natural undulating fairway affording a keen test to the experienced golfer. The sixth hole also plays a prominent part in contributing to, what experts term, a “sporty” course. The three and one-half miles of fairway, sufficiently wide at all points, is all in grass, kept green by seven miles of water piping, while the greens themselves are a vast expanse of velvety turf. The course is composed of two big nine-hole loops, which will have “right of way” at all points, crossing neither each other nor being crossed by any roadways. Par for the new course is 36 on each nine and this will give contestants

something to shoot at, as par is figured on yardage alone, no consideration being given the hazards. The total yardage is 6420 for the eighteen holes. (Editors note: a new par 3 11th was created years later, removing the par 3 16th which played east up a slope after the current par 5 16th. The 17th was played along the east of the current 17th).



Watson the architect of SDCC

“The handsome new clubhouse of the San Diego Country club at Chula Vista is just completed and is now ready for the furnishings. The formal opening of the club will be the last of this month and the first of September. On Wednesday, August 31st, and Thursday, September 1st, the club will be open for inspection for the members and their friends from 2 in the afternoon until 10 at night. On Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, September 3rd, 4th and 5th, there will be men’s and women’s golf tournaments, with tea each afternoon and a dance for the members Monday evening (Labor Day). The furnishings of the new club are to be placed early next week and while the color scheme is to be a surprise for the club members, the decorating and furniture and draperies are said to be most beautiful. Mrs. Lester Bradley is chairman of the house committee that has this in charge. Mrs. E. F. Bradford has been secured as manager for the clubhouse and will have her residence there and attend to the management of the place in general. The men’s golf committee, composed of Nelson Baker, Dr. Scott Watson, Alex. Reynolds, Jr., and C. W. McCabe has arranged the golf tourney for men, which will play the qualifying round of 18 holes, on Saturday. Mrs. Ed F. Chase is chairman of the women’s golf committee and Mrs. Heber Ingle is chairman of the social committee that has planned the opening events. Her committee is composed Of Mrs. B. J. O’Neil, Mrs. Frank von Tesmar, Mrs. August Sensenbrenner, Mrs. Sam Porter, Mrs. George Coulter and Mrs. Edwin Johnson. Edgar O. Hodge, president of the new club that now boasts a membership of 520, and Luther Ward, secretary, assisted by the various committees, are hard at work preparing for the opening of the club, which will be one of the best in the west.”

Under an exclusive fee agreement with the Del Coronado hotel, SDCC allowed the Del's hotel guests to play the "New 18-hole grass course...within a short ride by auto from Hotel". As shown in this ad from the national *American Golfer* magazine of 1922. Also, after seeing a grassed course, club officials from the Coronado Country Club hired William Watson to grass their course in 1921. That club closed in 1952 when the Spreckels Estate sold the land to create 113 homes in what is now called Country Club Estates at the north-end of Coronado.

HOTEL
DEL CORONADO
American Plan
 CORONADO BEACH,
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 18 Hole Grass Course
 and Grass Greens
 at Coronado

New 18 hole grass course of San
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 within short ride by auto from Hotel.

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SEE the Land of
 Wonder country of the west
 Empire mandarin, rare plants,
 Empire mandarin, rare plants,
 Empire mandarin, rare plants,

As for the Panama-California Exposition, at exactly midnight, San Diego time, January 1st, 1915, President Wilson hit a Western Union telegraph key from the White House that gave the signal to San Diego to begin the Exposition. Lights went on everywhere in the city, guns fired from ships in the harbor, the army fired cannons, a balloon at 1,500 feet over Balboa Park lit off torches and thousands of fireworks opening the event. It was successful beyond all expectations and caused the city to grow rapidly.

Much of the first San Diego Country Club lies under the parking lot of the San Diego Zoo which was made permanent after its popularity at the Exposition. (The fact that the animals were quarantined after the Exposition and not allowed to leave also helped to create a permanent zoo). The first hole probably was to the west of parking lot and the ninth hole probably was to east of the lot in a canyon that has since been filled in.



San Diego Zoo parking lot

Resources include: *American Golfer Magazine*, *Golf in the Far West* by Arnold, the 1984 Olympics site www.la84.org, San Diego city plans and maps, the biographies of William Watson, Tom Bendelow and A.G. Spalding, the history of the 1915 Exposition, the University of California at Riverside's digital library and newspapers including the *San Diego Union* and the *Los Angeles Herald*.